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ABSTRACT

Given the important role of local school boards in the school-restructuring movement, this paper presents findings of a study that identified what board chairs in North Carolina knew about school restructuring. The study also examined the extent to which chairs agreed with major ideological tenets of school restructuring and with their superintendents' views on school reform. Data were gathered from a 1994 survey of 119 local school-board chairs in North Carolina, to which 65 chairs responded (a 77 percent response rate). Two Likert-type scales were used to measure ideological agreement and knowledge on five domains--decentralization, work redesign for employees, school choice, student as worker, and board chair roles. Findings indicate that school boards did not constitute a major impediment to school restructuring. Board chairs demonstrated considerable agreement with four of the domains; they reported neutral attitudes toward school choice. However, when asked about their knowledge on these domains, chairs claimed less knowledge in all domains except school choice. A slight negative correlation was found between chairs' and superintendents' attitudes toward restructuring. The following recommendations are offered: (1) provide inservice education for board chairs, particularly about work redesign; (2) interview superintendent candidates about their views on school reform; and (3) boards advocating restructuring would do well to select women candidates from urban backgrounds with advanced degrees. Two tables are included. (Contains 41 references.) (LMI)

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RUNNING HEAD: Board Chair Ideological Agreement and Knowledge

ED 385 957

School Board Chair Ideological Agreement with and Knowledge About School Restructuring in North Carolina

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Abstract

The investigators used a mailout survey to assess local board chair ideological agreement and knowledge about five domains of school restructuring in North Carolina. Board chair agreement (rank-ordered on a five-point scale with 5 = highest) was: work redesign (4.40), board chair roles (4.14), district decentralization (4.14), student as worker (4.01), and community ownership/school choice (3.06). Board chair knowledge about the domains (same scale) was: board chair roles (4.10), district decentralization (3.69), community ownership/school choice (3.68), student as worker (3.58), and work redesign (3.40). Chair ideological agreement correlated negatively with perceptions of their superintendents' agreement (.-387). Chair knowledge correlated weakly (.289) with perceptions of their superintendents' knowledge. Four demographic differences were found in the sample between: a) agreement about work redesign and tenure as board chair; b) agreement about work redesign and district type (rural/town/suburban/urban): c) agreement about work redesign and education level: and, d) agreement about student as worker and board chair gender.

School Board Chair Ideological Agreement with and Knowledge About School Restructuring in North Carolina

Until the governance role of local school boards is addressed, our intentions to redefine schooling will have limited impact, according to policy makers in a landmark study of local governance (Facing the Challenge, Twentieth Century Fund, 1992). Unless local boards provide the leadership necessary in galvanizing support from community leaders, local professional associations, and central office administrators, we will continue to spin our wheels and operate from fragmented policy representing self-interest groups at the district and school levels (Timar & Kirp, 1989). Secretary of Education Richard Riley underscored the potential for local boards to promote coherent, district-level policy: "The School board must play a crucial and unique role as the vital link in making sure that systemic reform actually happens" (Kirst, 1994). Riley then cited the recent Institute for Educational Leadership study, whose authors (Danzberger, Kirst, & Usdan, 1992) emphasized that the school board was "the only entity which can ensure that various components of restructuring are linked coherently and do not become mere disjointed projects."

Given the potential (and necessity) for local boards to be key players in this reform movement, the purpose of this study was to assess a) what board chairs in North Carolina know about school restructuring, and b) the extent to which they agreed with major ideological tenets. Boards presumably cannot provide the necessary leadership if their chairs did not meet these two conditions.

Framing the Issue of Local Governance

School boards and their potential for cohesive, district-wide leadership are in the spotlight for two reasons: a) boards now are seen as the vital component in local governance structure; and b) they have both the power and influence to promote genuine restructuring at the district level. We discuss each reason below.

Local Governance and Systemic Reform

When state mandates initiated by A Nation at Risk (1983) did not result in rapidly improved student performance, policy makers and reformers began questioning the very effectiveness of U.S. schooling--especially given the complex challenges poised by changing demographics and transformation of economic and social life (Danzberger, 1994). School restructuring emerged from this critique in which reformers concluded that the entire system needed overhauling. Questions started being raised about how reform efforts ultimately played out at the district level among community leaders, administrators, teachers, and parents (cf. Timar, 1989).

Reformers and policy makers discovered that reorganizing schools in which students are required to use their minds well (Sizer, 1984) requires all pieces of the reform puzzle to change into a cooperative entity--hence the systemic nature of school reform (cf. Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988). We cannot change one piece of the reform puzzle without that piece affecting the configuration of other pieces. Teachers cannot change their relationships with students unless principals begin sharing

decision making with teachers (cf. Sarason, 1991). Principals cannot share decision making unless they receive commensurate autonomy from central office personnel, who are administrative arms of local boards. So local boards ultimately must set policies balancing school autonomy with district accountability to the citizens whom they represent.

The Power and Potential Influence of School Boards

Despite public perceptions that local school governance has been circumscribed by state legislative reforms and "nationalizing" trends (e.g., graduation requirements, national curriculum standards and assessments), these developments have only augmented the significance of local policy making (Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990; Wohlstetter, 1991). For state policy and federal mandates must ultimately be implemented at the district and school levels, and it is at these levels that local boards continue to wield considerable decision making authority and power. Local boards, if nothing else, are responsible for implementing federal and state policies (Rallis, 1993).

> Kirst (1994) summarizes the power of local boards:
>
> School boards play a legislative role when they adopt budgets, pass regulations, and set policies. Moreover, they provide the constituent-services component of a legislator's district office. Parents phone board members about fixing showers in locker rooms, relocating school-crossing guards.... School boards play an executive role when they implement policy. Many school boards approve not only the budget, but almost every expenditure and contract for

services. (p. 379)

In addition to decision making power, local boards have considerable district-wide influence on reform efforts at the school level. Timar (1989) underscored the need for support from the top in his analysis of the restructuring efforts of three districts. Dade County, Florida had the most promising chance for success because an understanding was made first between the superintendent (with the support from the board) and the teacher union. The local board, according to Rallis (1993), is in the position to define and establish the culture of local schools and therefore can play an important leadership role. This need for support from the top also is consistent with the literature on school change (Fullan, 1991): Schools can change when there is both commitment to reform by upper management and appropriate staff development, resource, and political support provided to principals and teachers.

In sum, the institution of local boards is under scrutiny, since policy makers and reformers question whether local boards are capable of providing the district level leadership (i.e., building a collective vision and community commitment) necessary for restructuring (Twentieth Century Fund, 1992). Despite this potential for leadership by local boards, many observers conclude that boards rarely provide unitary, collective vision necessary for restructuring. Local board members, according to Campbell, Cunningham, Nystrand, and Usdan (1985), consider their allegiance to their constituencies and often lack the will and capacity to support federal and state mandates. Boards also tend to micro-

manage (Rallis, 1993), instead of making and following established policies (Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on School Governance, 1992). In a recent survey, board presidents and administrators even perceived board members as impediments to change (Illinois School Boards Association, 1993).

The Rationale for This Study

Local boards have the potential for district leadership; rarely however, in practice do they provide this leadership. One precondition for board leadership is knowledge and ideological agreement about the tenets of restructuring. How can board members provide cohesive leadership without fundamental knowledge about the various dimensions of school restructuring and about board role changes advocated by reformers? How can a board lead if it does not know where it wants to go and why?

We need to assess what local board chairs know about school restructuring. Otherwise, state education agencies may formulate policies designed to create local conditions for student inquiry and critical thinking. The federal government may promulgate national standards. Nothing, however, may change in classrooms without local implementation of policies and standards. In the next section, we differentiate knowledge about school restructuring from ideological agreement.

Knowledge About School Restructuring vs. Ideological Agreement

Some board chairs can be knowledgeable about school restructuring, yet disagree with its basic tenets. For school restructuring is an ideology:[1] a set of inter-related beliefs

largely concerned with redistributing decision making power to teachers, students, and parents (cf., Sarason, 1991). Board chairs are unlikely to provide the needed leadership unless their beliefs are ideologically compatible with the tenets of school restructuring. Board chairs, for instance, would not promote policies devolving decision making on student assessment to schools if they believed that local boards and their administrators should continue to specify centralized regulations for student assessment. Examples of these tenets include a) devolution of decision making power to principals and teachers, b) redesign of teacher work, and c) curricular choices for student in exchange for making them responsible for their own work. Other advocates, claiming that the above changes do not go far enough, push for vouchers, tax tuition credits, and inter-district school choice (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Finn, 1991).

Given the assumption that local board chairs must agree philosophically with tenets of restructuring to be major players in the revampment of our public schools, we wanted to assess both chair knowledge and ideological agreement about school restructuring.

Second, we wanted to explore the perceptions of their superintendents' ideological agreement and knowledge about school restructuring. Unless board chairs and the chief executive office share some understandings about the need to change the status quo, little genuine change may occur in schools. Finally, we were interested in examining any associations between chair ideological agreement and the demographic characteristics of our sample to

construct a board chair "profile" for leadership in restructuring. Given these three purposes, five research questions emerge.

Study Questions

1) To what extent do NC local board of education chairs agree with the ideology of school restructuring?

2) What do NC local board of education chairs know about school restructuring?

3) How does board chair ideological agreement correlate with their perceptions of their superintendents' agreement about school restructuring?

4) How does board chair knowledge correlate with their perceptions of their superintendents' knowledge about school restructuring?

5) Are there any significant differences in chair agreement on the domains of restructuring when compared with demographic factors (e.g., chair tenure, education level, and gender)?

Method

Sample Selection

Board chairs were chosen for this study because of their positional influence. They set agendas and, when necessary, provide tie-breaking votes among boards members. Election by one's peers also implies a belief on the part of members that their chairs represent some common understandings among themselves.

Using board chairs as the unit of analysis also avoided the technical problem of reconciling inconsistent numbers of survey returns from district to district. How much "weight" would a

researcher attribute to a district in which all board members returned surveys vs. a district with only one of seven members returning the survey?

Instrument Development

A mail-out survey, conducted during the Summer 1994.

In March 1994 we conducted a literature search on school restructuring to construct five domains: 1) decentralization, 2) work redesign for employees, 3) school choice, 4) student as worker, and 5) board chair roles. (The appendix contains citations for all survey items.)

Two Likert-type scales were used: for ideological agreement with restructuring domains, 5 = "strongly agree" to 3 = "no opinion" to 1 = "strongly disagree"; and, for knowledge, 5 = "extensive knowledge" to 3 = "some" to 1 = "none." Including items on demographic characteristics resulted in a total of 31 items.

The instrument was critiqued for content specificity and its format was reviewed by an expert in mail-out surveys. The executive director of the North Carolina School Board Association (NCSBA) helped make the survey format as "user friendly" as possible.

Board members outside North Carolina pilot-tested the instrument. Based on their critique, we made minor revisions.

Procedure

1) The anonymous survey was placed on NCSBA masthead and mailed to all 119 local board chairs.

2) A follow-up mailing two weeks later was then conducted for

a final return rate of 65% (n = 77).

Data Analysis and Findings

1. Ideological Agreement About Domains of School Restructuring

Mean responses to board chair ideological agreement about the five restructuring domains were tabulated by item, and then the three items per domain were averaged. Board chair agreement (rank-ordered) with the five domains were: work redesign (4.40), board chair roles (4.14), district decentralization (4.14), student as worker (4.01), and community ownership/school choice (3.06). See Table 1 for tabulations of survey items and citations from the literature.

Insert Table 1 about here

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2. Knowledge About School Restructuring Domains

Chair knowledge about the five domains were analyzed by averaging all responses per item. Board chair knowledge about the domains (rank-ordered) were: board chair roles (4.10), district decentralization (3:69), community ownership/ school choice (3.68), student as worker (3.58), and work redesign (3.40). See Table 2.

An analysis of variance was used to examine the data for significant relationships among these domains. A significant difference was found between knowledge about board chair roles

(the highest rank of 4.10) and knowledge about work redesign (the lowest rank of 3.40); ($p \leq .1$). Interestingly, agreement across the five restructuring domains (3.93) was higher than chair knowledge about restructuring (3.69).

Insert Table 2 about here

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3. Correlation Between Board Chair Ideological Agreement and Perceptions of Their Superintendents' Agreement About School Restructuring

A Spearman rank correlation was run between the ten chairs with greatest ideological agreement about school restructuring across all five domains on the one hand and perceptions of their superintendents' agreement with school restructuring on the other. Chair ideological agreement correlated negatively with perceptions of their superintendents' agreement (.-387). This association, however, was not statistically significant ($p \leq .1$).

4. Correlation Between Board Chair Knowledge and Perceptions of Their Superintendents' Knowledge About School Restructuring

A Spearman rank correlation was run between the ten chairs with greatest knowledge about school restructuring across all five domains on the one hand and perceptions of their superintendents' knowledge on the other. Chair knowledge had a low correlation (.289) with perceptions of their superintendents' knowledge. This

association was statistically insignificant ($p \leq .1$).

5. Significant Differences Between Chair Agreement on Each of the Five Restructuring Domains and Demographic Characteristics of Board Chairs

A one-way analysis of variance was run to examine significant differences between domain agreement and demographic characteristics (tenure as board chair, education level, participation in NCSBA training, being a parent or grandparent of child/children in public schools, previous experience in public education, district enrollment, district type, gender, and ethnicity).

Four significant differences were found:

a) Between agreement about work redesign and tenure as board chair:
   - Board chairs serving two years or less had the highest agreement.
   - Board chairs with more than 8 years had lowest agreement;

b) Between agreement about work redesign and district type (rural/town/suburban/urban):
   - Board chairs from rural areas had the lowest agreement.
   - Chairs from towns had the highest agreement, followed by urban (second highest) and suburban (third highest);

c) Between agreement about work redesign and education level:
   - chairs with doctoral degrees had highest agreement.
   - chairs with high school diplomas had lowest agreement; and,

d) Between agreement about student as worker and gender of board chairs:

- Female board had a higher agreement than male board chairs.

Significant differences were not found between agreement about school restructuring domains and:

- Participation in NCSBA training sessions;
- Board chairs currently having children/grandchildren in public schools;
- Previous experience in public education;
- District enrollment; and,
- Ethnicity.

Discussion

If we assume that ideological agreement with tenets of school restructuring affects leadership quality of board chairs (i.e., the more chairs agree with restructuring, the more leadership they might provide), then the first finding does not support the national criticism that boards are a main impediment to school restructuring. Chairs demonstrated a considerable agreement with four domains (range = 4.40 - 4.01), particularly with employee work redesign (e.g., central office administrators being largely facilitators, not regulators; teachers provided opportunities for professional growth to overcome traditional norms of isolation and privacy). Chairs had a neutral position on community ownership/ school choice (M = 3.06). This last finding is supported by the 1994 Gallup poll indicating that the public in general is uncertain about school choice (cf. Elam, Rose, Gallup, 1994).

Yet, when asked about their knowledge on these domains, chairs claimed less knowledge than agreement in all domains except

community ownership/school choice. They claimed the least knowledge (3.40) about the domain with which they claimed most agreement (4.40): employee work redesign. This finding makes little sense: How can chairs agree most on the domain about which they claim least knowledge? Board chairs may merely reflect the general public's confusion about U.S. schooling: a sense that the system must change (hence the relatively high ideological agreement), coupled with an uneasiness about how to change it (correspondingly lower knowledge).

The exception to this generalization is community ownership/ school choice. Board chairs claim a neutral position on agreement (3.06) contrasted with a higher knowledge about this domain (3.68). Knowledge about board chair role (4.10) differed significantly from work redesign (3.40). This may be an important finding. Chairs seem relatively knowledgeable about their roles; they seem far less knowledgeable about roles of others. Yet we are trying to change the board role in our restructuring efforts: If chairs claim to be knowledgeable about their roles, what motivation would chairs have to change them?

The negative (although not significant) correlation between chair agreement and perceptions of their superintendents' agreement about restructuring is an interesting finding. The reader might recall that we compared the ten chairs with the highest agreement compared with that of their own superintendents. Possibly, the more the chairs find themselves ideologically committed to restructuring, the more they are inclined toward skepticism about their superintendents' commitments.

Yet knowledge about restructuring of the top ten chairs had a moderate (although again insignificant) positive association with that of their superintendents. How can ten chairs with the highest agreement about restructuring correlate negatively with that of their superintendents and yet knowledge about restructuring of the top ten chairs correlate positively with that of their superintendents? Such an inconsistency is anomalous.

Possibly, chairs with the greatest commitment toward redefining schooling in their districts were dissatisfied with the comparable commitments of their superintendents. They may have hired the wrong superintendents, partly because they failed to interview candidates about their views on restructuring. We plan to explore this apparent contradiction in our follow-up interviews in March 1995.

Demographic data and their association with knowledge about school restructuring provides a speculative "profile" for board chair leadership. Board chairs with two years or less tenure indicates that these chairs may have potentially strong ideas that emerged during the late 1980s and early 1990s. They have not been socialized into traditional board norms both of micro-management (Twentieth Century Task Force, 1992) and of representing their own constituents (Rallis, 1993). This speculation is buttressed by the finding that high agreement about redefining employee work correlates highest with education level (the higher the education level [doctorate], the more chairs may favor teacher professionalism). Rural chairs having the least agreement with restructuring may indicate the relative isolation

of rural schools from "mainstream" innovative ideas about education (cf. Cole, 1988). Finally, the high statistical association between student as worker and gender (female) appears buttressed by recent research on the efficacy of female administrators vs. male administrators. Female administrators, according to this line of research (e.g., Shakeshaft, 1981), are more collaborative, caring, and conceptually prone toward leadership as opposed to preoccupation with controlling personnel. This generalization may extend to ideological differences between female and male board chairs.

In this study we assumed that school restructuring was an ideology (e.g., redefining power relations in schooling). We expected, therefore, a bi-modal distribution of responses, with many responses on both extremes of the scale (i.e., "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree"), and relatively few in the "no opinion" position. Stated another way, board chair ideology (e.g., Christian conservative values vs. schooling to maximize citizenship for democratic governance) should either match up or clash with those of restructuring.

This response pattern, however, was not observed in our data. In four of the five domains, data were skewed to the "strongly agree" position: district decentralization, employee work redesign, student as worker, and board chair roles had this distribution: 36% "strongly agree," 52% "agree," 5% "no opinion," 6% "disagree," and 1% "strongly disagree." Community ownership/school choice had 9% "strongly agree," 34% "agree," 17% "no opinion," 31% "disagree," and 8% "strongly disagree." Only

community ownership/school choice confirmed our expectation of bimodal distribution. In the other four domains, chairs demonstrated reasonably strong agreement with restructuring.

Implications

School board chair ideological agreement about basic tenets of restructuring does not emerge as a major obstacle to state-wide restructuring efforts. This finding, however, should be interpreted cautiously for three reasons. We must consider the possibility of rater bias: Did many of the 35 percent who did not return the survey do so because they disagreed with the very concept of school restructuring? The discrepancy between agreement and knowledge may account for a second reason. Responses may have been skewed toward ideological agreement with the survey because respondents were expected to do so. They may have had correspondingly less knowledge about restructuring because board members developed neither shared understandings about how restructuring operates in practice nor exposure and training about new understandings about cognitive processes involved in thinking and learning (Caine & Caine, 1990; Marzano et al., 1988).

We end this paper with three suggestions for improving school board chair leadership. Given the finding that chairs demonstrated greater agreement than knowledge about restructuring, board chairs may need inservice designed to further their understandings about what restructuring is and why schooling needs to be redefined. Information apparently is most needed about work redesign, since chairs had most agreement with this tenet and

correspondingly the least knowledge. An ideal vehicle for such in services is the state school board association.

Second, given the negative association between top ten chair agreement about restructuring and their perceptions of superintendent agreement, boards might interview superintendent candidates about their tenets on restructuring. Boards committed to restructuring would have difficulty affecting organizational changes without administrative support of their chief executive officers.

Last, given the demographic findings, policy makers and other reformers advocating restructuring may try to influence recruitment of citizens who might be interested in campaigning for school board positions. Women candidates both with town and urban backgrounds and advanced degrees, emerge from this study as ideal candidates for school board chairship.

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Footnotes

[1]The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Sharon F. Rallis in making this distinction.

Table 1.

Agreement With Tenets About School Restructuring

Item No.	Question	Average Score
	District Decentralization (4.11)[a]	
1	Students will be better served as more decisions are made at the school level. [Carlson, 1989, p.2; Clune & White, 1988, p. 3]	4.09
2	School boards should work with central office administrators to identify criteria useful in determining which schools are ready for shared decision making. [Glickman, 1993, p. 111]	4.05
3	Principals' role generally should change from middle manager dependent on central office administrators to that of coordinator and supporter in developing students as responsible, independent learners. [Carnoy & Macdonell, 1990; Chapman & Boyd, 1986, 1986, p. 55; Rallis, 1990]	4.19
	Work Redesign for School Employees (4.39)	
4	Central office administrators generally should view themselves not as regulators but as service providers, assuring each school that it receives what is necessary to operate successfully. [Carlson, 1989, p. 3]	4.47
5	Teachers are more likely to establish classroom environments for lifetime learners if they are provided opportunities for professional growth, such as mentoring and attending seminars to exchange professional knowledge with peers. [Clark & Meloy, 1989; McCarthey & Peterson, 1989]	4.38
6	School restructuring involves replacing teacher privacy and isolation with professional collaboration and inter-agency cooperation. [McCarthey & Peterson, 1989]	4.31

Community Ownership and School Choice (3.05)

7 Educators should be encouraged to start their own (that is, "charter") public schools based on professional and community-shared philosophies about how their children learn best, such as basic skills and arts-centered approaches. [Nathan & Ysseldyke, 1994] 3.15

8 Parents should have opportunities to send children to the schools of their choice anywhere in their districts. [Chubb & Moe, 1989] 2.76

9 School site councils empowered with major decision making authority are a good way of providing a collective sense of community ownership. [Lindquist & Muriel, 1989, p. 405] 3.24

Student as Worker (3.97)

10 The traditional classroom model of teacher as dispenser of information should give way to student as critical inquirer and self-directed learner. [Sizer, 1991] 3.99

11 If we want to reorganize schools around the student as worker concept, then we should implement school-level structures, like block scheduling and cooperative learning groups. [Boyer, 1983, p. 114; Council of Chief State School Officers, 1989] 3.96

12 Student assessment should become less reliant on pencil-and-paper tests and instead should emphasize tasks set into meaningful contexts, such as writing a letter to an editor or using mathematics to build a state budget. [Rothman, 1991] 3.96

Board Chair Roles (4.14)

13	A major task of board chairs should be to help define their districts' core beliefs about the meaning and purpose of teaching and learning. [Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988]	3.99
14	Board chairs should join their superintendents in leading community discussions to craft mission statements about if and why schools should be restructured in the first place. [Corbett & Blum, 1993, p. 692; Glickman, 1993]	4.12
15	Local boards can help create the necessary district conditions under which individual schools can evolve into learning communities. [Wiggins, 1993]	4.33

[a]Average of this component.

Table 2.

Knowledge of Each School Restructuring Component

Component	Average Score
District Decentralization	3.69[a]
Work Redesign for School Employees	3.40
Community Ownership and School Choice	3.68
Student as Worker	3.58
Board Chair Roles	4.10

[a]Figures are average of all 77 respondents.